Yes, And:

Theses & Experiments in Street Combat & the Black Bloc

fragments distro
tucson, az 2019

North American Society for the Advancement of Criminal Science

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This article was originally published under the title *"Yes, And: Results from the North American Contagious Antagonisms Inquiry, 2007-2012".* We made this pamphlet version in 2019, 7 years later. We have now had time to see some of the proposals put forth in this article play out in a variety of scenarios across the country. Ill Will Editions published this article in a great anthology of texts on street tactics called *"War in the Streets"* we highly encourage you to seek out. This particular article contains a helpful theoretical and practical proposal which has now spread, often referred to as the "grey bloc". In an effort to continue these experiments and proliferate variations on the black bloc and "grey bloc" tactics, we have republished this piece as a stand alone zine with a flashy cover. This zine is being finished as an uprising in Sudan is being massacred, there is an ongoing revolt in Haiti, a tactically intelligent uprising in Hong Kong is just beginning, and street clashes in Frayser, Tennessee have just erupted after another police killing of a young black man named Brandon Webber.

see you in the streets
- fragments

Yes, And:
Results from the North American Contagious Antagonisms Inquiry, 2007-2012

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> ***Inquiry figure 1: The Black Bloc***
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> *Thesis: The black bloc is limited by obsolete aesthetic forms and reduced strategic imagination.*
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> *Hypothesis 1: The black bloc will spread antagonism more effectively if it can overcome these limits*
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> *Hypothesis 2: The black bloc should:*
> - *Abandon identity*
> - *Abandon predicates*
> - *Develop collective intelligence*
> - *Develop tactics*

I.

The black bloc is a method to prepare and hasten the clash. It is an anonymous way of being together, outmaneuvering police, and making attacks that radically alter the way we think about ourselves, power and our environments. Contrary to the critiques by those who fail to understand our contemporary situation, the black bloc is a long-term project engaged in a monastic work to develop undocile contagious practices.

II.

The black bloc is a tension between insurgent identity and event. On the one hand, because the black bloc is a *dynamic* set of practices, it produces an *unstable* subject position: the black blocer. On the other hand, because the black bloc is also an *event*, rather than a fixed identity, it radically interrupts our functional roles as workers, citizens, students, etc. In this way the black bloc is always negotiating a tension between naming—and thus stabilizing—its subject position and becoming indistinguishable from the riot as a few antagonistic yet predictable gestures. While the latter claims an ethics of openness, it also limits how the black bloc can continue to stay unstable and tactically unpredictable.

III.

At the heart of our self-analysis and critique is the question of the black bloc's meaning. What does is it connote, describe, and do? For us the black bloc means: strategic antagonism.

The black bloc has the potential to connote "we who rebel intelligently." However, it more often connotes "anarchism" because it is employed instrumentally to essentially advertise for that particular political identity. In most cases the narrative might go like this: there is a struggle, it has a dominant reformist discourse, anarchists feel marginalized and call for a black bloc in order to bring more radical ideas to the surface. In this way, the anarchists vote as bloc—the same way as other political groups—in order to be better *represented* in the struggle. However, the tactics deployed and the images produced create a heroic specter, whose glorious figure of revolutionary purity doesn't correspond to the need for anonymity as a practical necessity of contemporary revolt. The use of the black bloc as such locates the figure of the anarchist, the criminal, and the militant all in one place. The black bloc's objectives: *contagiously* reversing the operation of power on our bodies, taking back force, and elaborating practices of offensive opacity–are accomplished by *diffusing these practices* throughout the space and time of a struggle, not by consolidating them in single revolutionary subject. In this way, the very aesthetic that our anonymity rests upon currently works against us. The employment of *all black everything* separates us and functions to produce us as anarchist subjects with predictable motions and roles we fulfill. Even if a black bloc is composed solely of self-described anarchists, it must resist the ideological temptation to claim it as a terrain exclusive to anarchists. The black bloc should spread anarchy as a practice—not an idea or identity.

IV.

The challenge of resonance and contagion is exacerbated by the black bloc's ahistorical ethical and aesthetic positions. The anarchist figure appears as a body detached from history, clinging instead to antiquated forms. Whereas each struggle to which we are bearing witness appears to itself as something *new*, the anarchist black bloc remains trapped by the image of Seattle '99. This is not a problem of the techniques we use to destroy property—we've seen a lot of beneficial advancements in that—nor is this a problem in the techniques employed to confront the police. Here we have seen useful developments as well. The use of barricades, rocks and bottles, burning cars; the use of laser pointers to disorient the police; the use of Information Technologies to gather and disperse with greater speed and agility all amplify our tactical senses. The challenge we must on with far more seduction and malleability than our old game of dignified militant struggle.

Beginning Again.

For almost a decade, for three rounds of struggles, an assemblage of anti-control sciences has been tinkering with techniques, environments, and dispositions of struggle. While its clear that the black bloc is not the single methodology of contemporary struggle, we privilege it as a site of development because of its easy entry-points, relative flexibility and by the way our conditions continue to summon it. Some have theorized a mythical Plan B in order to supersede the limits of the black bloc at demonstrations. Occasionally, this has been practiced as the black bloc's ferocity and intelligence, deployed outside of the large demonstration arena. Plan B has also been "attacking your enemy where he is not" within demonstrations, and as smaller gatherings that make dramatic public attacks—using speed and anonymity to escape capture, rather than the cover of a large crowd. While these experiments are conjured by the same spirit, we believe the current situation–a growth of strange and impressive struggles–is not the time to focus on how to intensify struggle, but how to alter our environments in ways that expand the territory of struggle. To us, the musical question is more one of duration and frequency than intensity. Intensity will follow, providing that initial question is posed in a way to solicit "Yes, and."

We will more than likely be forced to continue this work for another decade. This monastic work of building a long term project of street confrontation and undocile practices is not in order to prepare for an event in the future. It is monastic precisely because the time in which this project takes place is a time contingent on but external to the time of the work-day. Our victory will come not by messenger, nor by the final orgasm of history. Rather, revolution will be the complex unfolding of billions of relations of domination, accented and accelerated by insurrection. From the time we entered this project to the present, the general geography of everyday struggle has condensed and multiplied, continuously paving the urban and suburban human environment in revolt against this society. There is increasingly less time between capitalist normality and moments of rupture. We expect our victory will be the slow, painful saturation of this world in such ruptures. The task set before us is how we will develop the necessary endurance, means, and vitality to be able to make these ruptures inhabitable.

certain fluidity gave it decisive agency. We need to reorient ourselves to this intelligence. Our environments can change based on how we act within them. We don't have to stay together as a unit, linking arms and marching as a bloc. This is true for a demonstration and the entire space and time of a struggle. We can move through a smooth field. The same techniques employed for communicating where to gather to march and where to regather can be used *within* the entire terrain of a social struggle and a gathering point doesn't have to lead in a linear path to an objective. A flashmob could converge within a march at a precise moment, and a precise location (for example: behind the Teachers against Budget Cuts banner) and then disperse and reemerge once we reach *this* building, *this* line of cops, or some other sign which we endow with meaning through our self-organization. This could be extended based on our capacity and levels of organization. Using a higher level of technology to achieve a circuit of communication is not the only way to accomplish this, but today's struggles from the Banlieue riots to the Flashmobs across the US to the Arab Spring prove that contemporary revolt has a penchant for collective intelligence. Spreading and refining these techniques may not be as troublesome as some might think. There may be ways that don't require everyone involved having a trashphone, or smartphone with a secure text app; its up to us to experiment.

Experiment 5: *Or if we really want to experiment with being unpredictable:*

Imagine a game spread through the same message and image boards that generate the phantom, Anonymous, except it elaborates the "doing it for the lulz" project in real time. Simple rules: you have to be invited to play, and if invited, you have to play.

Through the spread of #occupy, one can't help but notice those "live feeds." With UStream, one can watch and hear the events unfold, and even communicate through IRC in real time with others watching and the person who's broadcasting the live stream. Imagine some players on the ground, in a demonstration or something else, as avatars, while their friends literally direct their movement. The on=ground player might always decide to do different than what she is told, but it might also be more fun to be *whatever*, and lose one's self. Such a game would generate complicities capable of producing a far more terrible practice of offensive opacity by bringing the logic of spectacle to its hyperreal threshold. While certain questions of how to establish the necessary trusting environment, or completely anonymous environment, for such a game are yet to be answered, the technological and social conditions are quite ripe. We see now the spread of YouTube videos highlighting both social struggles and absurd criminal acts of youth for pornographic consumption. Such a game might catch overcome is the same challenge at the core of every struggle. How do we lose our predicates? How do we dissolve ourselves into a common?

V.

Imagine the event of an insurrection as either a complex experimental symphony or a drawn out improvisational drama, with a touch of comedic elements and heroism. In either situation, all the participants will first begin with almost no plan or shared sense outside of their environment or their knowledge of their instruments—most times no one will have any intent on playing together. Something happens, someone begins to play, and when the rhythm touches others they join in. Or in the latter case someone speaks, asks a question, and others respond and build on the narrative. In each case the primary operation must be endowed with a force of seduction. This is not to say erotic or pleasurable even, but *decisive* in how it approaches its environment. The operation must pose a question that is irresistible to answer. An experimental composer once said "the hidden secret that makes this thing function is that the audience wants to be a part of the [...] plot" This originary operation, the gesture that repeats itself even as it grows in complexity, must solicit the response "Yes, and." This is how we can measure the success of the black bloc. In the experimental symphony, this is how each musician adds their own layers of emotion and aesthetics to the structure, even by altering the initial rhythm. In the improvisation drama, this is how the narrative grows essentially from nothing, then departs and returns to different plot elements. "Yes, and" must be the answer to rhythmic question "We need this, do you?" *How* this question is posed defines the particular meaning of the black bloc.

VI.

As the crisis deepens, revolt spreads. 1+1. simple math. However, instability is a familiar sensation for an economy based on the assumption of scarcity and constant expansion. Capital is well calibrated to crisis, and the arguments that "it will get better, when it gets worse" don't fare well historically. As the economy is thrown into crisis, control and repression also deepen. In order to integrate antagonisms into a manageable framework, the fields of social sciences, anthropology, and psychology are enlisted to research the finest details of life. Meanwhile others specializing in police science dutifully work to calculate and predict the movements of antagonism in general. Once these antagonisms can be reduced to qualities and data, governments can begin to regulate, distribute and circulate these antagonisms in a way that produces value or guards against any further disruptions. One thinks of both the subtle integration and circula-

tion of identities, the brute force of imprisonment, elimination through police bullets, and reduction through war. This governmental technique, sometimes called "risk reduction", in practice functions as preemptive counter-insurgency. Here we see that counter-terrorism—as a set of policing measures and juridical transformations—was a maneuver that foreshadowed this epoch of crisis, developing its science over the course of several decades to be perfected just in time to stop the next revolutionary surge. We can't count on the simple math.

VII.

As the environment of struggle shifts, so should our strategy. The contemporary sites of struggle are no longer demarcated spaces of confrontation—summits of the elite where our discourse congeals around a critique of financial capital and around a moral rejection of state violence. Revolt is now found in a delimited environment, more closely aligned with nightmarish war theory, where everything and everywhere is a potential terrain of conflict. There is an increasing need to develop common techniques that are easily appropriated. No one would have predicted that by 2010 a specter of university occupations would hang over the US, much less that a movement of occupations would erupt across the globe by 2011. But given the circumstances we believe this will spread, mutate and deepen. For our own safety locally and to contribute to the historical struggles emerging at a global level, black blocs must be able to pose the question: "We need anonymity, do you?" And as the lulzy hacker group Anonymous proves, the response "Yes, and" may not take the form we expect.

VIII.

At the moment when struggles were cohering as a convergence of the antagonistic remnants of culture—the cycle of struggles that included environmentalism, third-wave feminism, anti-death penalty, anti-war, and anti-globalization—*all black everything* attacking the symbols of financial capital was clearly contemporary. The black represented a conscious sense of the way these ethical practices were excluded from capital, and financial capital was the example of shameless entrepreneurship *par excellence*. However, today our anti-social media darlings no longer conjure a meaning exterior to capital—mostly because these forms (culture) could be, and were, integrated into the general circulation of commodities. The black bloc and corresponding meaning that was linked to a set of subcultural identities is empty. There may remain a caricature in some newspaper making reference to one of our more loud participants–the anarchist punk–but as we all know, there is no longer a world for such a creature. Some may feel a sense of depressing nostalgia for how capitalism has drained our subcultures of

Nearing the end of March 2012 a wild fare strike subtly assaults the subway fare apparatus in New York. A proper action, smoothing the line between our well known clandestine figures and that of an *everyman* mass worker. The attack targets some 20 stations during the morning's busiest hours and is claimed by the Rank and File Initiative, a collection of #occupiers and Transport Workers Union Local 100 and the Amalgamated Transit Union. Of course the union's leadership denies involvement in any such thing. In the an anonymous interview posted on the Village Voice website, the Rank and File Initiative says there were around 3-4 people in each station all disguising their identities, and that union members were paramount to the logistical elements. While the action doesn't immediately give birth to mourning shop owners, it does function to create rupture in the normal flow of metropolis precisely because those who didn't pay were all complicit. Here we see the practical mutation and intelligent application of complicity, resonance, and opacity.

The anonymity we need isn't limited to the streets. Zones of opacity must be established. We need intimate meetings where we can discuss, make plans, and sort out the real material solidarities and resources to achieve our objectives, without the threat of the police. We need to elaborate a system of deciding what levels of trust are required, and how to practically implement this. Perhaps we need a different culture than that of security. Perhaps we need a multiplicity of possible forms of trust. We may not need to know each other for a million years to engage in a collective criminal attack against capital—such as the Port of Oakland blockade—but we need to spread a fluency in this illicit dialect.

The practice of conspiracy, of strategic thought, of breathing together, must be a commons of skills and new forms that we all draw from. Here it is important to reflect on the NYC fare strike interview that followed the release of the communique because it highlights *how* they did it. Instead of just privileging propaganda to explain our actions through the matrix of social critique, we should explain how to participate—as if it were a game with simple rules. This, above all else, must be developed in the coming years.

Experiment 4. *Determine our own terrain of struggle; become unpredictable.*

Our enemies deeply examine the geography, duration, and intensity of struggles, and develop their techniques of policing from this. Recognizing that we cannot count on pure numerical superiority and spontaneity means we must elaborate a practice of unpredictable movements and gestures. A central contribution of the black bloc to the summit riots was its refusal to have its movements bared by conventional limits—police, fences, architecture, and protest marshals. A

The first wave of occupations in the US, from the Newschool in NYC to the University of California, saw quite a bit of this experimentation. A line of power grew from a house discussion, a classroom, a bar, a rooftop, and multiplied.

In the western territories, one saw the insulation of cliques formed through these struggles grow with experiment, not without the accompanying pangs and mistakes. The intensity leading up to the March 4th UC-wide student strike proved to be a misplaced nostalgia for summit demonstrations of yore. However, events which followed the fizzled climax generated a certain intelligence about how to engage with Marx's maxim "Men make history but not in conditions of their choosing."

The summer of '11 saw an interventionary strategy, composed of "anti-cut" events revolving around a discourse of anti-austerity by a group called Bay of Rage. While the actions—mostly smaller street parties-cum-confrontations with the police—never generated the results that the initial Bay of Rage participants wanted, they did consolidate a shared sense between them, and recreate their environment as a laboratory of subversion. Moreover, the shared space to *practice* developed a certain endurance, sense memory, and refining of muscular and mental energy, that, when *something happened*, was tuned to the rhythm of struggle. Here the normal situation of someone murdered by police quickly took on new meaning as Bay of Rage went from a few hyped actions of diehards to becoming host to riotous demonstrations of a few hundred. The shift against the Bart police also added to this chorus. The anti-policing sense gave birth to new rhythms and these resonated with others beyond those closest to the Bay of Rage. Anonymous, street youth, and an array of many other worlds joined this choir. The situation continued to build on itself, as more people responded with "yes, and." We might see the impressive developments with Occupy Oakland in this light.

A small song booklet theorized how this taste for strategic thought might spread outside of our milieu. "When a couple of angry bus drivers, or grocery store workers encounter some of us in this or that place, and we say: 'there are fifty of us, we have these means, and we want to fight.' The rest is silence."

Through practice we develop the means, consistent numerical capacity, and qualitative knowledge and techniques. When our practice effectively re-inscribes the meaning of an environment's signs, architecture and geography, our presence is undeniable. In such a situation, the ease with which practices can cross-germinate and mutate also establishes the necessary condition of communication—translation, and audibility.

what was living, but the emptiness of the black bloc—its abyss of potential chaos—is precisely what makes it more relevant than ever. The black bloc drained of identity has the potential to become open in ways impossible when it was only the practice of a limited set of subcultures. Strategic antagonism in a world increasingly composed solely of hostility now has the potential to shed its veneer and experiment.

Experiments

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What follows is a set of experiments to be immediately put into practice. The results should be examined, and analyses should be shared through our internal circuits of communication.

This text, although in public forums, is an example of how our communication works. We can say there is something, but there is no need to speak of its content. Thus, a cypher is put into public spheres. The cypher codes that a black bloc is called. The call speaks to those who hear it. It happens. If it happens well, if would appear that there was never a black bloc at all, only the event. However, *the real* of the event is not pure spontaneity, but the ease with which antagonistic techniques are able to spread and mutate.

* * *

Experiment 1. *Street clothes is the new black. Plain colors on the first layer, prints, stripes or plaids for the second layer. Jeans for bottoms.*

In some occasions, when the entire struggle is already located as criminal or revolutionary, all black makes sense—that is, it generates a certain meaning, a certain attention to our surroundings. "Black" for us should connote *speed* and *intensity of attack*, not ideology. Anonymity can be gained collectively through means other than the color of our clothing. Hats and scarves alone work quite well to make a surveillance camera less effective. An outer layer can be disposed. Shoes can be changed. A large crowd on its own also helps. If a few people in black are throwing rocks, they are easily isolated; if what appears to be "anyone" is throwing rocks, they are concealed by the contagion of the practice. A slow riot, drawn out street fights, the spread of undocile practices. These can be achieved when it is increasingly difficult to distinguish the law abiding citizen from the annotated figures of protest and revolt.

Experiment 2. *Slogans and signs are a thin barrier between us and the police—use them accordingly.*

Banners, yes; black flags, sometimes.

Black bloc has meant a different way of engaging in struggle. It has meant the advancement of tactical anti-police and property damage sciences. When shedding our facade, we need not lose the tactical intelligence of banners and flags. Banners call attention. Contemporary struggles do not cohere over "ideas," and we first came to this realization through the black bloc. Like the myth of "free speech" under the reign of democracy, banners provide a thin barrier between us and police. Use them accordingly.

Here the movement of occupations has been very clever and instructive. The first wave of student occupations against austerity measures saw the use of shields painted as books—a tactic appropriated across an ocean and a few continents. In New York instead of the demand "Never work!" or slogans that cohere over ideas such as "against capitalism" banners, we see the intelligent use of an ambiguous narrative "I will never get a job in this economy." While our creativity remains captive until we are emancipated from the regime of value, our use of slogans and text should be charged with the same meaning as our defensive technologies.

Flags on the other hand have a history which links them to identity, to nations, to a People. Being that there is no longer any People outside the global citizen-producing project of Empire, even those flags waved by the citizens of anarchism and communism are but an empty threat. Just as the Red and the Black flew next to the Serbian flag during the strike to oust *Milošević, just as the Black Flag flew next to the Mexican Flag during the Immigrant general strike of '06, these symbols no longer carry meaning.*

Flags also have a different history, a technical history in both combat, and festival. Flags can be used to signal just about anything—a charge, a way of moving together, a certain time in which its good to disperse; they need not be black. And of course, flags are sticks with piece a of cloth attached. Here we would do best to not care if the image is a masked youth waving a black flag in front of a cloud of teargas or a surly old man swinging the stars and stripes at some cops, bellowing about taxation.

Experiment 3. *Spread the disease.*

Conspiracy means strategize together. The sense of a different way of being together, of getting organized, is one of the paramount achievements of the black bloc. We need to find ways to spread this sense across new fields of struggle. With confidence in our experience, we need to humbly experiment with applying our tactical knowledge to different conflicts, with people otherthan just seasoned riot-tourists.